RICHARD COHEN

The Fires in the Ghetto Burned for the Enemy

MORRIS IS TALKING. It is nearly his anniversary—10 years. Ten years ago this week 586 fires burned in the city of Washington. One of them burned in Morris' liquor store. First he was looted and then he was burned. It's all right. He was once the enemy.

"The police called around midnight," he said. "They said the store was being looted. They said please don't come down. They said it wasn't safe. We went down around 10 a.m. the next morning to open it back up. The store was a mess. We lost $30,000 worth of liquor. At 1:30, the police came back. They said there were lots of people coming. They said we had better leave. They said they were two blocks away. This time there was a fire. That's what happened to me. It was pretty bad. It was very bad."

In a simpler age, Morris was the enemy. We all knew that. I, for one, knew that. I, for one, bought all the rhetoric, especially that stuff about men who own liquor stores in the ghetto—about how they took the money out of the community and how they sold on credit and how they were hated. They got what they had coming and even if you didn't buy all of that entirely, it made it easier that they sold booze by the pint to men so poor they didn't have a hankerchief to blow their own nose.

"Yeah, I heard that," says Morris. "I heard that from Jewish people even. Some people said that, but we never cheated anybody. We went according to the book, sometimes even cheaper. I'll tell you right now that black stores are charging more than they should. I see prices in some of these stores that are ridiculous."

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Morris does not want me to use his real name, but he exists—he exists. Someone told me about him, about how he owned the liquor store in the ghetto, how he got looted and then burned and how it left him scarred—a little man with a mental tremble. They told me how he could never again run his own business and had to work for someone else—nerves shot, they said. It turned out it wasn't Morris they meant. It was his cousin. He was a partner in the store.

The voice of Morris is younger than the man himself is. He's close to retirement now, a man who works for other men, who punches a clock not his own and does not understand how he became the enemy. All he ever did was work. He worked first in Southwest Washington where he had a clothing store that got urban-renewed away and then he worked in the liquor business when there was no other kind of business to buy. You think he wanted that business? Do you think he wanted 12 hours a day and six days a week and five holdups and asking all the time for IDs and turning away drunks and looking into the bloodshot eyes of women in dirty raincoats—a pint of vodka for breakfast.

This is the way it is. This is the way it was when I worked in a liquor store for a relative—a sad-eyed man who went into the liquor business because it was a business and there were children to feed. He used to close at night so he didn't have to deal with kids lying about their age and he wouldn't stock pints so the hard-core drunks would pass him by. But still they came, men and women alike, fighting to look as if they didn't need a drink, straining for control, perfectly dressed, pulling the whole thing off, until if you look down, you could see they were still in their bedroom slippers. It would make you want to look away. My boss was a man who hated his work.

"I have a wife and three children," says Morris. "I had to make a living. My kids went to school. It cost me a fortune to send my kids to school. Thank God they turned out fine. For the effort I put in, I am very thankful. My oldest one is a doctor, my daughter's husband is an attorney and the other is an accountant. I worked very hard for that. I worked very hard for that. It was work, work, work. To put in so much effort and then to get burned out. We had paid off the note a month before. It was a very sad experience. After all that work we did, not to be able to make a profit. After all the work we did."

It helps Morris to talk about what happened to him. It is a relief to be able to talk about it. For a long time he was bitter. After the fire and the looting, he went down to the Watergate Hotel where the insurance companies had set up temporary offices. He paced the hallways, pleading, yelling, pulling his hair. Later, he sued the government. Wherever he went, he was treated as if he had it coming. He had tried to make a living and for this, somehow, people thought he had it coming.

Now it is the morning after the conversation with Morris. I am standing outside the store he used to own, thinking about the anniversary about the riots and whether things are better or worse or about the same. The store has just opened and people start to come out of their homes for another day of hard drinking. A man in a bush jacket buys a pint, and then a woman buys a fifth and then a couple, laughing loudly and holding the bottle up high, buy another fifth. It is a sad process that has changed little in the last decade—the same people, drinking the same booze, falling into the same ghetto gutter. At that moment, Morris was on his way to New York for a relative's wedding. He wasn't needed after all.

And to think, he was once the enemy.